

in the food rut and no longer see magic in the meals I cook. Eggs are a reminder of all the weird, magical chemistry contained within every bite we eat. Next time you're flummoxed for meal ideas in the kitchen, think eggs. Hold an egg in the palm of your hand and remember that it is a capsule of pure potential: if you have eggs in the house, you have dinner, no matter how bare your kitchen cupboards. Often, when I'm raiding the fridge for a weekday dinner, I heat up whatever leftovers I have – whether it's jollof rice or stewed aubergine with spices and spinach – and just serve with a fried egg on top. Somehow, a single egg makes the whole dish sing anew.

## Hungry human bodies

### Food in the frame

Food is everywhere in art. There's a painting in Tate Britain, for instance, called *Cookmaid with Still Life of Vegetables and Fruit*, painted around 1620 by Sir Nathaniel Bacon. In this luxuriantly colourful, detailed work – so large that when you stand in front of it, you can scarcely take it all in at once – a buxom cook reclines winsomely against a wall, surrounded by an abundance of fruit, vegetables and flowers. To her left there's a basket piled high with figs, peaches, apples and plums; from the right-hand side of the painting sprout four or five of the biggest cabbages I've ever seen, each of their unfurling, wrinkled leaves as big as a small child. I'm not joking when I say that the maid holds a massive melon to her ample chest. It's hardly subtle, but that's what this kind of symbolic excess is all about: a celebration of wealth, plenty, and full-chested womanliness, regardless of the reality of what it means to harvest, cook and eat the haul at hand.

But do you know how hard it is to find artworks that show people eating? It's an impossible task. Food is everywhere, in the old masters and even in the strange, difficult, modern art of the here and now, but good luck finding a painting of someone actually taking a bite of something. Even in Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, none of the thirteen figures at the table are taking the opportunity to actually eat. People make a living from taking photos of the food they eat in the

restaurants they visit, and posting these snaps online, and yet we seldom see these self-declared gourmands take a single bite. Eating doesn't seem to have the same magnetism as the symbolic potency of the foods themselves. The eating of a burger is pretty quotidian, and not really the preserve of art, presumably. And yet a burger that acts as a metaphor for the greed of the Western world – somehow that's easier to stomach. I can't help wondering whether our own pride is tied up in this strange double-edged view of food. Eating is a messy act. Anyone who's ever been tagged in a photo on Facebook after a meal out will know the thumping panic of seeing themselves mid-mouthful, spinach in the cracks of their teeth, jaw twisted. There's no dignity in salivating, biting, chewing, swallowing, digesting, gurgling, burping and shitting. As much as we'd like to preserve some image of ourselves as pristine visions of faultless human glory, we're actually pretty gross. To eat is to admit that we are part of all the mess and madness of the world, and maybe that's something we don't want documented for posterity.

But the truth of the matter is that, much as we might like to think of ourselves as spiritual, emotional beings, on some level at least we are cells, atoms, dirt, germs, matter. We are made of *stuff*. Something as resolutely physical as food – pure, heavy stuff, from dirt-caked potatoes to the chips on your plate – can't feed, fuel or cure us or give us pleasure unless we, too, exist in that material world. While you read that poetry book or catch up on *The Fall* or engage in some blindingly clever philosophical musings, your body stays rooted in your chair, on this earth, doing all the wonderful, complex, disgusting, smelly things that bodies do. At some point in your intellectual pursuits, sooner or later, you'll be brought back into your body by a rude gurgle from your belly or a craving for something sweet. Your body is hungry for more. We're all messy, hungry human bodies, in the end.

### Digest this

So, food anchors us in this world. It's something that earths us, even when our heads are in the clouds. We are animals, which means that we need energy from food in order to stay alive. It's a crucial daily reminder that we are finite, physical things. The ways in which our bodies mould to our food, and our food to our bodies, are, I think, some of the most incredible transformations that nature can offer up. Forget shooting stars or snakes slipping out of their skins, the way that something as unremarkable as a floppy petrol-station cheese sandwich can go from its packet, to a salty sharpness on your tongue, to the very fabric of your moving, breathing, living human body: that's magic. Just how does this sorcery unfold, though?

In a way, it would make sense to start this story with the mouth. The mouth is, after all, the official starting point of your food's journey through your digestive system, before it gulps into your oesophagus and tumbles into your stomach and through the metres of your intestine. We begin to mix our bodies with our food the second that it touches our lips, with enzymes in our saliva breaking down the starches in our food long before it ever reaches our stomachs. But I want to look at hunger first. Because somehow, the feeling of your belly rumbling, or the prickling excitement that floods your mouth at the thought of a great meal – these things are, to me, the purest reminders of what it means to eat.

Hunger is a sensation that we all experience at some point. It's the feeling that you need to eat, although beyond this it's difficult to find much consensus about exactly what 'real' hunger is. Common opinion has it that hunger is the physiological need to eat, whereas appetite is framed as just a desire to eat, driven by emotional or sensory pleasure rather than bodily need. We see this in the division between nutrition and gastronomy, or between food as fuel and food as pleasure. If it is really the case, then it should be easy to differentiate

between 'real' hunger and its imposter, the greedy pangs of appetite. After that greasy burger and those salty, paprika-dusted curly fries, you should be able to recline, accept your satiety and graciously decline the dessert menu. But all too often, that's not how things work.

Certainly, there are times when you feel so full that it's as if the food is piled all the way up to your throat, and you can recognise that niggling desire for an After Eight as the superfluous pleasure-seeking that it is. And, of course, you know in your heart that a bowl of porridge will better sate your morning hunger than the Mars Bar your appetite is veering towards. But just as often as they diverge, this physical hunger and psychological, sensory appetite merge into one. In reality, we find it hard to pick apart the particular craving we have for cheese on toast from the bodily needs that drive it. We might start a bowl of pasta to satisfy a hunger, and finish it to satisfy our senses. If it were that easy to pull pure hunger apart from extraneous craving, life would be very functional, and very dull.

Consider what's frequently brushed off as greedy, hedonistic appetite, for instance – namely, the desire to eat things that taste good and make us happy, such as a pint of cold beer and a plate laden with curry, or a bowl of ice cream squeezed in after a full roast dinner. For some, that's completely different from the hunger that rattles our stomachs in uncomfortable pangs when we've been working so hard we've skipped lunch. And yet, experience attests to the fact that our primary criterion in choosing food is not how it will satisfy our hunger at all, but how it tastes. Here in the UK, where food is plentiful, and so many of us are guided by questions of pleasure in our day-to-day decisions about food, it's just not possible to draw a clear line between 'fun' pleasure-eating and some kind of mythic 'true' hunger. Those distinctions just don't make sense.

### The pleasure principle

So, pleasure is key to our decisions about what we eat and when. We're rarely just hungry for any old carbohydrate, for instance. Instead, we'll be hungry for buttery mashed potato, a heavy bowl of saffron risotto or a toasted hot cross bun. And sensory, pleasure-centric appetite doesn't just serve to make our gustatory lives more enjoyable, it can actually improve the nutritional quality of our diets.

A famous study conducted in the mid-1970s can shine a light on this. In the study, two groups of women – one Thai, the other Swedish – were fed a rice dish made using flavours and ingredients popular in Thai cooking. Researchers then monitored how much iron each of the groups of women was able to absorb from the meal, supposing that this mineral uptake would indicate how well the women were able to digest, and be nourished by, the food. The results were startling. The Thai women, who were more at ease with the spiciness of the food than the Swedish group, absorbed nearly 50% more iron than the Swedes. What's more, when, in another study conducted by the scientists, participants were fed the foods they knew and liked, first in the format they enjoyed, and then in a less appetising, but nutritionally identical, puréed format, the researchers discovered an even greater disparity in nutritional absorption. The women absorbed on average 70% less iron when they consumed the puréed foods than when they were able to appreciate the tastes, textures and sight of the meals in their usual presentation.

What these studies suggest is that the enjoyment we get from our food is intimately connected to the nutritional power of that food. Pleasure isn't just a happy side effect of following your appetite, then – it can be something that keeps us healthy. In a study conducted by Fifth Sense, a charity for those who suffer from a loss of smell or taste, it was found that 43% of people suffering from anosmia – a loss

of smell, which almost obliterates the capacity to taste different flavours – experienced depression, and 92% a decreased appreciation of food and drink. Anosmia also carries with it a risk of malnutrition, weight loss or gain, as those who live with it struggle to maintain an interest in eating, once so much of the pleasure has been stripped from it. There is even the risk of food poisoning, as people with anosmia can't discern rancid or 'off' foods from those that will do them good. Clearly our ability to smell and taste isn't just an aesthetic benefit, but a physiological necessity: with a nose for good food, the fulfilment of a basic human need – namely, the need to feed – becomes something that we can pursue fully, enthusiastically, and with pleasure.

And even when the food itself is to our taste, the context of our eating has a huge bearing on our bodies' ability to properly process and digest that food. Stress can suppress our appetites, dry our mouths, cause indigestion, and lead to diarrhoea or constipation. Imagine sitting down to breakfast before a big exam. In front of you is a plate of thickly sliced bread, toasted to a mottled gold and heavy with melting salted butter. Maybe you've spread sweet strawberry jam on the toast, too, or Marmite, or fragrant blossom honey. Anxious about the looming exam, you hurriedly guzzle the toast, but you barely taste it, and you certainly don't enjoy it. This inoffensive piece of toast will come back to haunt you, about fifteen minutes before your exam, when your belly swells to a pregnant bloat. Maybe you'll need to rush to the bathroom, or maybe you'll spend the exam trying to concentrate while smuggling silent farts. Who can tell? The point is that when you eat during stress and upset, that psychological anxiety can manifest itself as physical malaise.

The link goes the other way too: in recent years, more and more conversations have been had about the role of the gut in brain health, to the degree that the gut has been dubbed

the 'second brain' by some nutritionists. There's some evidence to suggest that imbalances in the microbes in the gut can set off a chain reaction that may also lead to problems with things like concentration and cognitive ability, and even brain development. This science is comparatively new, though, and especially in light of some of the more unscrupulous 'nutritionists' out there (one so-called scientist called Natasha Campbell-McBride came to notoriety after claiming that Alzheimer's, autism and more could be managed, even cured, by a grain-free diet), it's worth exercising caution before completely overhauling your diet. Whatever comes of these new scientific insights, it's clear that the brain and the gut are rather unromantically allied, and what goes wrong with your thoughts can easily turn the fortunes of your belly, too.

It's not just what you eat, then, it's how you eat it. Eating food that you enjoy, in a context that's relaxed and pleasurable, is a step towards more efficient digestion and better health. Of course, not every sausage roll that you hanker after will be in your body's best interests, nor will every vitamin-packed smoothie necessarily get your tastebuds leaping for joy. But there's a lot of comfort in knowing that your appetite and your health needn't act at odds with one another. Sometimes, you can just sit back and trust your appetite to lead the way. Dietitian Ellyn Satter has a quote on the front page of her website: 'When the joy goes out of eating, nutrition suffers.' It's a thought that captures what should be a self-evident truth of eating: that it does us good to feel good. I'll talk more about Ellyn Satter and the principles of intuitive eating that she proposes elsewhere in this book, but for now just let her little catchphrase take root in your mind. Take it to the table with you this evening and let it fill your plate with things that awaken your senses. Follow your greedy, fickle, frivolous appetite where it leads.

### Feel-good food

My girlfriend had a horrible cold recently. When Leah's sickness was just beginning to take root, burrowing into her sinuses and throbbing in her head, I made her a smoothie. I made it with fresh ginger, orange juice, big chunks of frozen mango, carrots and green apple, and poured it into her Thermos flask so she could sip it at work. I cooked her a warming soup that day, too, packed with all the veg that her ailing body probably needed. I gave her mugs of acrid-smelling, syrupy cold and flu remedy, and steady doses of herbal tea, and prescribed an early bedtime. I was sure she'd wake up the next day feeling better for all the love and vitamins I had sent her way, and as she sank into sleep with a wad of tissue bugged up one nostril, I graciously laid a healing hand over her heavy head and congratulated myself on a job well done.

The next morning, both Leah and I woke up foggy-headed and shivering. Cocooned in blankets and surrounded by a constellation of scrunched-up tissues, we lay in the living room all day watching old episodes of *Come Dine with Me*, drinking hot water and lemon, and praying for death. We did everything our mums would've asked us to – hot showers, hydration, soup, hydration, rest, hydration – and grew weaker by the hour. By mid-afternoon, Leah was so frail that she gagged when she tried to swallow a paracetamol, and it looked like we'd just have to let this sickness run its course.

But sometimes, at the gates of death, you get a flash of divine light and see all the beauty of the world and all the hope that's left to live for. In that moment, teetering at the pearly gates, so close that you can almost feel the candy floss clouds beneath your feet, you see your glorious future unfurl around you, and you decide to stomp right back into life and seize the day. That's exactly what happened when, ten minutes after gagging on a pill and turning down a cup of tea,

Leah turned to me with an unfathomable light behind her eyes and said: 'I have ordered £30 of Indian food on Just Eat.'

With numbed tastebuds and blocked noses, we ate like queens. We had Bombay fish curry (a fiery hot, creamy sauce, rich with chunks of tender mackerel), which came, as everything does on that takeaway menu, 'especially recommended by Abdul'. We wolfed fluffy, steaming rice with heaps of garlicky tarka dal, and between spoonfuls nibbled on spicy chicken wings, bright with lime and coriander and the punch of fresh red chilli. We ate with ferocious delight until we could eat no more. Our heads were still pounding, our bodies still bristled with goosebumps, and our skin was still tender to the touch. But for an hour or two, reclining in a happy, burping, bloated haze, we felt alive again.

It doesn't have to be a blow-out curry, of course: you can feel better again with a slice of dry toast or a teetering mountain of soft-baked fudge brownies, depending on your mood. It might be that a bowl of chicken soup or shepherd's pie is what you need to revive your spirits, or it could be – flying in the face of every piece of mum-wisdom you've ever been given – that what you really need is one of those McDonald's milkshakes that drags through the straw and coats your mouth and catches in your throat with delicious, saccharine glee. (For what it's worth, it's been shown that dairy doesn't actually increase mucus production after all, and any association between consumption of dairy and coughs has been shown to be negligible.) These foods might not be packed with precisely the vitamins and minerals and macronutrients that your body really needs right then and there, but they will make your soul soar, and sometimes – when the very fabric of your life is one big snotty tissue – that's all you really need.

### Marvellous medicine

'But what about my gout?' I hear you cry. 'What about diabetes and high blood pressure and anaemia? Are you saying you can worm your way out of scurvy with a fish curry and some positive thinking?' Well, no. There are times when just *feeling* better is enough to *get* better – this is how Abdul's fish curry can help you through a cold, or a mug of thick hot chocolate before bed can drown out those insomniac anxieties for a night. In some cases, the psychosomatic element of some illnesses and ailments can be just as potent as the physiological cause. A 2003 study found that people with more positive emotional approaches to life were less susceptible to common cold viruses, while those who were more prone to negative emotions reported more symptoms, including unfounded symptoms, when exposed to the viruses. With that in mind, it's not impossible that eating something that makes you happy, which floods your wearied senses with pleasure or, at the very least, distracts you from your sickness, can be enough to put you on the road to recovery.

But not all sickness is this suggestible, and sometimes the body needs specific nutritional tools to help fuel its fight against microbes, immune disorders and so many of the other myriad strains that we endure each day just by virtue of existing, and surviving, in a stressful world. We take in nutrients from our food, and those nutrients – from the building blocks of carbohydrate, protein and fat, to minute doses of vitamins and minerals – are used by our bodies to keep us healthy, strong and well. Eat citrus fruits to keep your vitamin C levels up, and boost your immune system; boost your iron intake with leafy greens if you don't eat red meat, or you might risk anaemia. This is cause and effect at its most fundamental: goodness on your plate will help to foster goodness in your body. It's the idea that food can be medicine, rather than just fuel, and that, with a bit of fine-tuning and

the right cocktail of nutrients, we can not only keep ourselves alive and well, but actually optimise the ways that our bodies function.

This quest for health doesn't need to be some joyless equation, though. Food is both fuel and medicine, but this doesn't mean we have to strip it bare of its magic and reframe it as a power source for some robot-like, maximally efficient human body. Yes, the reality is that food is a basic, physical human need. It is fuel, in a sense, and by extension, we are machines that need fuelling. But we're also thoughtful aesthetes who enjoy things like the smell of the sea air, and *Buffy* reruns, and pub quizzes. Our bodies are not just heavy machines that we drag around with us, and our gastronomic pleasure isn't just an aside when it comes to the mechanics of eating. Food can be medicine, and still be a joy. With that in mind, and because I want you to have the bliss of tasting delicious things, no matter the state of your health, here are a few meal ideas – with some notes on their medicinal properties – to help you feel good about staying well. Take the medicines your doctor gives you, don't forget to get your five a day and do your exercise. But have a little fun with your mealtimes, too.